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**Paved With Good Intentions: Boris Yeltsin's Strategic Road to Chechnya, 1995-1996**

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## **Paved With Good Intentions: Boris Yeltsin's Strategic Road to Chechnya, 1995-1996**

When Russian tanks rolled into Chechnya in December 1994, Russian President Boris Yeltsin expected a quick and decisive end to his problems with the upstart republic. Instead, he found his country enmeshed in a hellish military and political quagmire with no solution in sight. This paper will examine Russia's national security strategy as it relates to Chechnya's bid for independence. It will also analyze the strategic road leading to the use of military power to resolve the crisis. The thesis of this discussion is that Yeltsin's decision to use military force against Chechnya supported Russia's national interests in a unified Russian Federation. The military strategy ultimately succeeded despite a poor understanding of both the nature of the war and the will of the Chechen people.

### **RUSSIA'S NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY**

An examination of Russia's strategy in dealing with the Chechen crisis requires consideration of the two key personalities in this drama: President Boris Yeltsin and Major General Dzhokhar Dudayev. Both men shared common histories and common characteristics. In 1991, Yeltsin planted the seeds for Chechen independence while engaged in wresting political authority from President Mikhail Gorbachev. In his campaign for the Russian presidency, Yeltsin developed support from the periphery states of the new Russian Federation by encouraging the republics to "take as much sovereignty as they can."<sup>1</sup> During this transition period, Dudayev, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Chechen National Congress,

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<sup>1</sup> (R-4, 112)

led pro-Yeltsin demonstrations in Chechnya.<sup>2</sup> Even though Yeltsin knew the Chechen National Congress promoted Chechen independence, he decided to use Dudayev's support to strengthen his bid for the presidency. He thought he would need to deal with the problem of Chechen independence later. He was right. When Yeltsin succeeded Gorbachev as president, Dudayev took advantage of the tumultuous transition period and declared Chechen independence from Russia. He



apparently took Yeltsin literally and seized as much sovereignty as he could. Yeltsin reacted immediately, by sending a small military force to Grozny in an effort to end the crisis quickly. Dudayev countered by taking the Russian soldiers hostage. After three days, Yeltsin backed down. Dudayev freed the hostages and later gained control of the substantial Russian Army garrisons in Chechnya. This lapse in Russian resolve allowed Dudayev time to solidify his leadership position. Yeltsin would live to regret choosing expediency over a long-term solution. In their many interactions with each other, both Yeltsin and Dudayev displayed dogged

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<sup>2</sup> (R-4, 113)

determination and a fondness for power. They continued to exercise these traits in the coming military confrontation.

In formulating a strategy for dealing with Chechnya, Yeltsin made several assumptions about the international and domestic environments. Prior to his decision to resort to military action, he made the broad assumption that forcing Chechnya back into the Russian fold would not result in intervention by the international community. While he could expect official hand wringing and expressions of concern from the United States, the risk of further action was low. He had learned from the Afghanistan experience that American resolve had its limits. The United States was even less likely to help Chechnya gain its independence than it had been to support the Afghan rebels. He correctly assumed the United States would view the Chechen problem as an internal one, a case of civil war that Russia should resolve on its own.

Faced with few international constraints on the use of military force, Yeltsin confronted the more difficult issue of the Russian domestic environment. Here he faced a wide array of complicated issues, competing interests, and divergent personalities that made strategic decision-making difficult. First, Yeltsin needed to shore up his flagging presidency. His 1994 popularity rating stood at a paltry ten percent, with elections just two years away.<sup>3</sup> He increasingly faced questions regarding his health and his drinking habits. The Russian people expressed mounting dissatisfaction with his failure to manage the Russian economy and the dwindling value of the ruble. Yeltsin also confronted stiff right wing opposition from Vladimir Zhirinovsky, an extreme nationalist who had received the largest share of the vote in the 1993 parliamentary elections. Zhirinovsky favored a return to the “old Russia” and Yeltsin saw him as a threat to Russia’s democratic future. Yeltsin believed that if he could solve the problem of Chechnya, his

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<sup>3</sup> (R-3, 144)

popularity would increase and he could eliminate the danger posed by Zhirinovsky. Secretary of the Security Council Oleg Lobov summed up the situation well when he said, “We need a small victorious war to raise the President’s ratings.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, Yeltsin’s archenemy, Ruslan Khasbulatov, had returned to complicate matters in Chechnya. Khasbulatov, former Chairman of the Russian Parliament, had opposed Yeltsin in the parliamentary revolt of 1993. As a result, Yeltsin had put him in jail. Unfortunately for Yeltsin, the Duma released all members of the 1993 parliamentary resistance movement, and Khasbulatov returned home to a hero’s welcome in Chechnya.<sup>5</sup> This was the backdrop for Yeltsin’s strategic decision-making process in the winter of 1994.

In some ways, Yeltsin, like Dr. Frankenstein, became a victim of his own creation. He had used Dudayev’s support to gain the presidency and supported Dudayev in return. He now confronted the monstrous consequences of political expediency. In addressing this crisis, Yeltsin knew that if he continued to exercise patience the Dudayev regime might implode on its own. Some evidence existed to support that proposition. From 1991 to 1994, Dudayev’s public support had eroded. Rallies demanding his ouster became more frequent. Popular support plummeted as a result of Dudayev’s failure to deliver the promise of prosperity to Chechen citizens. Unemployment soared to over 50 percent. Corruption at the highest levels of government became commonplace. By 1994, only 16 percent of the Chechen population favored complete independence from Russia.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> (R-3, 161)

<sup>5</sup> (R-3, 146)

<sup>6</sup> (R-4, 119)

Despite these signs of internal weakness, Yeltsin decided not to wait any longer. He decided to lend covert military support to the Interim Council, an organization dedicated to ousting Dudayev. In November 1994, armed Chechen resistance groups opposed to Dudayev attacked Grozny. The attack failed and Dudayev's forces discovered Russian soldiers among the opposition. This revelation caused the Chechen people to rally in support of Dudayev and against Russian interference. Yeltsin unwittingly fueled the people's resentment when he issued an ultimatum requiring the warring factions in Chechnya to lay down their arms or face Russian military intervention. As much as the people disliked Dudayev, they hated the idea of Russian rule even more.<sup>7</sup>

In deciding to use military force, Yeltsin may have looked beyond the immediate threat of the Dudayev regime and seen something worse. He may have envisioned Khasbulatov stepping into the Chechen presidency upon the ouster of Dudayev. If that happened, one of Yeltsin's worst nightmares would have come true.<sup>8</sup> He decided he could not take that risk.

Yeltsin believed that Chechnya's bid for independence threatened the survival of the Russian Federation. During his rise to power, Yeltsin had advocated the collapse of the Soviet Union and promoted the outbreak of democracy in its former satellites. He viewed the collapse of the Russian Federation in a different light. Yeltsin reasoned that if he allowed Chechnya to go its own way, some of the other 88 ethnic and regional factions in the Russian Federation would surely follow.<sup>9</sup> Even a partial collapse of the Federation would result in less tax revenue, less

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<sup>7</sup> (R-2, 54)

<sup>8</sup> (R-3, 150)

<sup>9</sup> (R-4, 124)

resources, and less power in Russia. Yeltsin could not accept the risk of an independent Chechnya acting as a catalyst to other independence movements. He believed a display of Russian might and resolve could not only solve the immediate problem of Chechnya, but also eliminate the risk of future secession movements.

Even if Yeltsin discounted the risk of proliferating independence movements, he could not overlook the threat to Russian national welfare posed by the loss of Chechnya's oil resources. Chechnya's strategic location at the juncture of several major oil and gas pipelines, as well as its significant oil refining facilities, made the idea of Chechen independence unthinkable. If Yeltsin allowed the Chechen independence movement to succeed, he would face the wrath of the Russian people, demanding to know the reason for fuel shortages and price increases. A loss of oil refining capacity of 480,000 barrels per day would hardly go unnoticed.<sup>10</sup> He knew that if he allowed the Chechen oil flow to stop, his presidency would effectively end.

Allowing Chechen independence also posed a threat to Russia's system of values. Russian leadership viewed Chechnya as a "running sore" of anarchy and lawlessness.<sup>11</sup> As a fledgling democracy, Russia was in the process of establishing a system of order and values based on the rule of law. The Russian people saw Chechnya as the embodiment of lawlessness. Chechnya stole oil from Russian pipelines, refused to pay Russian taxes, bribed Russian officials, and embezzled money from the Central Bank.<sup>12</sup> Some Russian leaders profited from this widespread corruption. Others merely allowed it to continue. Yeltsin faced increasing pressure to end these

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<sup>10</sup> (R-4, 115)

<sup>11</sup> (R-2, 53)

<sup>12</sup> (R-4, 118)

corrupt practices and restore law and order both at home and on the Chechen frontier. He feared that if he could not restore order, the Russian people would replace him with someone who could.

In addition to addressing the threats to Russia's national security posed by the Chechen crisis, Yeltsin saw an opportunity to enhance Russia's stature, both domestically and in the international community. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many people both inside and outside of Russia, believed Russian military power had collapsed as well. Soviet military performance in Afghanistan underscored what many saw as the impotence of the Russian Army. Yeltsin knew that a decisive military victory in Chechnya would restore domestic confidence and demand international respect for the Russian military. He knew that he could expect some criticism for the use of force, both at home and abroad, but he believed a quick victory would silence the critics.

In deciding to use military force against Chechnya, Yeltsin decided on a strategy that minimized risk and maximized cost. He believed Russian national interests could not condone the existence of an independent Chechnya. If Chechnya achieved independence others might follow suit and the Russian Federation would fail. He also believed he had to preserve the flow of oil and stem the tide of lawlessness in Chechnya. These factors, along with the threat to the viability of his presidency, caused him to opt for action rather than enduring the status quo. His desire to eliminate these risks outweighed the costs represented by the lives of Russian soldiers and the drain on the Russian treasury.

Although Yeltsin encountered little opposition to his proposed end state of keeping Chechnya within the Federation, his decision to use the military as a means to that end caused widespread disagreement. Many Russian generals, including the commander of the Military

Council of Ground Forces, opposed military action in Chechnya. The generals cited low morale, poor equipment and inadequate manning as reasons for their lack of readiness. Other senior military advisors, including Defense Minister Pavel Grachev, told Yeltsin that military readiness was more than adequate to topple the Dudayev regime in short order. Grachev discounted the likelihood of a full-scale war with Chechnya and told Yeltsin the whole thing would be over in a matter of weeks.<sup>13</sup> Faced with these competing points of view, Yeltsin weighed both Russia's mobilized military power as well as its potential strength and reached a logical conclusion. The scales tipped in Russia's favor. Russia had overwhelming superiority in both air and ground forces. Even if military readiness had deteriorated somewhat, Yeltsin reasoned that defeating Chechen forces should not prove overly difficult. He was wrong.

## **RUSSIA'S MILITARY STRATEGY**

Chechen character: "Their god is freedom and their law is war."  
- Mikhail Y. Lermontov. 1832

In reaching his decision to use military force against Chechnya, Yeltsin had analyzed the political reasons for keeping Chechnya within the Russian Federation. He had considered the pros and cons of military force as it related to Russia's national security interests, and how using force could serve his personal interest in remaining in power. He thought he had made proper assumptions about the international and domestic contexts of his actions. But Yeltsin had made

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<sup>13</sup> (R-3, 1)

a key miscalculation that would result in grave consequences for the Russian Army. He had failed to gain a proper understanding of the Chechen people.

Yeltsin's failure to understand his opponent played a role in shaping Russian military strategy. As a result, the strategy lacked coherence in determining how to achieve the desired end state of a unified Chechnya under Russian control. The main emphases of the Russian strategy were to drive to Grozny, destroy Dudayev, and impose peace through overwhelming military force. In formulating this strategy, Yeltsin focused on Grozny and Dudayev as the Chechen centers of gravity. In doing so, he failed to recognize the true center of gravity: the ideology and stubborn will of the Chechen people. The Chechens hated outside interference, especially from Russia. When faced with outside interference, Chechens tended to band together in clans and fight fiercely against all aggressors. Chechnya's clan warfare system emphasized family unity, which bolstered their morale, even when faced with overwhelming military superiority. The Chechens also tended to set aside internal disputes when facing an outside foe. This can account for the increased support for Dudayev after the Russian assault on Grozny. Dudayev, though an important symbol of Chechen resistance, was not essential to organizing the defense of Chechnya. Dudayev functioned as only one head of the Chechen hydra.

The drive to Grozny commenced on December 10, 1994. In preparation for the ground assault, the Russian Air Force had destroyed the Chechen Air Force without losing a single aircraft. Russians ground forces included 38,000 regular troops, augmented by tanks and armored personnel carriers. On its face, this force might have seemed sufficient to deal with the Chechen uprising. A closer examination reveals serious flaws. The soldiers in the Russian Army had little military experience. Most of these young conscripts had never seen battle. The Army as a whole had not conducted a divisional exercise since 1991. Virtually none of the

participants had received the specialized training required for successfully fighting in an urban environment. These deficiencies held grave consequences for the Army.

The Chechen people wasted little time in becoming involved the fight. It took the Russian Army 15 days to travel the 120 kilometers to Grozny due to interference that varied from intense harassing attacks to non-military resistance from Chechen family groups. The complexity of the Chechen effort foreshadowed elements of the future conflict. Though no discernible cohesive effort existed, the Russians encountered constant Chechen resistance. The Chechens used a cleverly disguised network of centric warfare to confuse the Russians. Slowly the Russians realized that they were facing a decentralized but organized attack. By the time they reached Grozny, the Russians knew they could not break the Chechen will with a simple demonstration of firepower. Taking Grozny would require brute force and a protracted battle.

During the battle for Grozny, small groups of Chechens developed the practice of “hugging” Russian units using hunter-killer tactics. This effort proved extremely effective and resulted in significant Russian losses. More importantly, these unrelenting non-linear assaults broke down the will of the Russian conscripts. What they viewed initially as a quick march to the center of gravity in Grozny had evolved into a lengthy conflict against a determined foe.

Russia’s poor performance in the battle for Grozny resulted as much from poor planning as from the inexperience of the Russian Army. Apart from achieving air superiority, they made almost no effort to prepare the battlefield. They did not close Chechnya’s borders or cut off the supply routes leading to Grozny. Many commanders lacked rudimentary items like maps and written orders. Also, commanders did not understand their objectives or how to accomplish them. This confusion filtered down to their subordinates. Leaders in Moscow showed their confusion as well. They did not equip their commanders to combat an opponent waging an

organized asymmetrical war. As a result, commanders could not react decisively when faced with the Chechens' complex independent operations strategy for the defense of Grozny.<sup>14</sup> Instead, they relied on centralized control and rules of engagement that, among other things, did not allow them to fire on Chechen civilians unless they fired first.<sup>15</sup> This gave the mobilized Chechen populace a marked advantage. Yeltsin apparently underestimated the Chechen people's will to resist across the spectrum of the conflict. He would regret this assumption.

When their initial assault plans failed, the Russians changed their tactics. They eliminated some self-imposed restrictions and unleashed an onslaught of firepower on Grozny, including air assaults. Resistance fighters and civilians alike became targets. They also began to replicate some of the Chechen tactics, using smaller more agile units. Although these innovations helped, the centralized nature of Russian command and control hampered their efforts. Finally after two months of heavy fighting, Russian brute force prevailed. The Army captured Grozny on March 21, 1995.<sup>16</sup>

After Grozny, the battlefield shifted to Chechnya's villages and rural mountainous areas. Russia quickly found itself embroiled in another Afghanistan. Their indiscriminate use of firepower against villages and rebel strongholds fostered resentment among the Chechen people and strengthened their resistance. In an effort to soften the resolve of the Chechen people, Russia adopted a new strategy. The "sword and samovar" approach offered inducements or punishments to Chechen villagers to compel written truces. The Russians claimed to have

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<sup>14</sup> (R-1, 33)

<sup>15</sup> (R-1, 32)

<sup>16</sup> (R-1, 40)

entered into these agreements with two-thirds of the Chechen settlements. Unfortunately for the Russians, these truces seldom lasted and had little practical effect.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the sword and samovar, Russia used information and psychological warfare techniques against the Chechens. They focused most of their efforts at the tactical level. Their use of information warfare techniques emphasized tactical jamming, local deceptive broadcasting and interception of Chechen traffic to disrupt tactical operations. Tactically the Russians achieved nominal success. They found a database of Chechen soldiers that led to the arrest of many resistance fighters. They also jammed Chechen communications broadcasts and air defense systems to make their assaults more effective. In an innovative use of the electromagnetic spectrum, the Russians even honed in on Dudayev's cell phone frequency and killed him using a PGM. While these innovations improved Russia's effectiveness in the field, they did not change the course of the conflict.

The Chechens demonstrated much more aptitude for strategic information and psychological warfare than the Russians.<sup>18</sup> They displayed a high level of sophistication by gaining the support of NGOs to plead their case in the court of public opinion. This effort not only gained international attention but also struck at the heart of Russian popular support. Although both sides used brutality as a psychological weapon, the Chechens raised it to a grisly art form. By decapitating dead Russian soldiers and booby-trapping their bodies, they demoralized Russian troops. The high number of desertions among Russian soldiers bears testament to the effectiveness of their campaign. At one point an elite group of Russian

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<sup>17</sup> (R-5, 129)

<sup>18</sup> (R-7, 217)

commandos became so demoralized they walked off the battlefield and went home.<sup>19</sup> This scenario and many others like it illustrate the effectiveness of the Chechen strategy.

Throughout the conflict, Russia showed little strategic competence in the military arena. The Russian organizational structure proved incapable of adjusting rapidly to the asymmetrical battlefield. They continued to focus on attacking the opposition leadership and did not develop a strategy to earn the support of the non-committed Chechens. Their excessive reliance on overwhelming firepower undermined progress in winning popular support or developing peace initiatives. The inherent limitations of the sword and samovar program undercut its effectiveness. In virtually every operation, Russia's tactical emphasis frustrated their strategic objectives.

By contrast, Chechen leadership capitalized on the value of an asymmetrical campaign. In the latter part of the conflict, they even expanded their effort to areas outside Chechnya. The Budennovsk<sup>20</sup> and Kizlyar-Pervomaiskoye<sup>21</sup> campaigns were complex and well designed operations using civilian hostages to undermine the unity between the Russian military and political leadership. The Chechens suffered many casualties while achieving these objectives, but maintained an unrelenting assault on the will of the Russian Army.

Chechnya's greatest triumph of the war started and ended on 6 August 1996. In a surprise attack against superior numbers, Chechen forces attacked Russian positions in Grozny and recaptured the city. This defeat crushed what remained of Russian morale. It also caused Russian leaders to reevaluate the viability of further military action. Yeltsin quickly decided to

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<sup>19</sup> (R-7, 221)

<sup>20</sup> (R-7, 219)

<sup>21</sup> (R-7, 221)

send Alexander Lebed to Chechnya to negotiate an end to the conflict. In exchange for a cease-fire and Russian withdrawal, Chechnya agreed to table its bid for independence indefinitely. This negotiated end state came at a high price. The 20-month Chechen campaign cost Russia 2,800 Russians killed, 10,319 wounded, and 393 missing.

In evaluating the costs of the conflict, it is important to note that Russia views battlefield casualties differently from many of its Western counterparts. Though militarily beaten, Russia's ability to absorb casualties had a strategic impact on its war with Chechnya. Russia decided to pay the price of high military casualties to achieve its political goal of keeping Chechnya in the Russian Federation. The Chechens found the price of freedom excessive and deferred the autonomy issue. As a result, the Russians won the strategic battle, gaining time to regroup, study the war, and prepare for the next test of Chechen will.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Why did Yeltsin decide to use military force against Chechnya? Was he really trying to protect Russia's national security interests, or was he simply using the military to bolster his political career? In opting for war, did he really hope to gain a better state of peace? There are no easy answers to these questions. In many respects, Yeltsin may have believed military force presented the only rational alternative. The weakened state of the Russian economy after the Cold War severely restricted the use of economic incentives or sanctions to achieve Chechen allegiance. Besides, sanctions took time and Yeltsin needed fast results. Russia's attempts at diplomatic solutions made no headway against the personality of Dudayev. Faced with a perceived lack of alternatives, Yeltsin chose the only option he believed would work. Or did he?

Is it possible that Yeltsin and his advisors blundered into the Chechen quagmire as a result of a vacuum in the Russian strategic decision-making process? Some evidence exists to support the proposition.<sup>22</sup> When the Soviet Union collapsed, the bureaucratic systems associated with it collapsed as well. Some of these bureaucratic systems supported Soviet planning and decision-making. It does not appear that the new Russian democratic bureaucracy had effectively filled this planning and decision-making void.

As late as November 1994, Yeltsin opposed using military force in Chechnya. What accounted for his change of heart in December? Was it the studied result of a deliberate planning process? It is interesting that in the aftermath of the Chechen conflict, no one wanted to take credit for making the decision.<sup>23</sup> Maybe this reluctance resulted from the natural tendency to distance oneself from an unpopular decision of dubious effectiveness. On the other hand, it may express the confusion and frustration associated with relying on a strategic decision-making process that did not exist. The lack of an organized decision-making process, combined with Yeltsin's failing health and political woes, did not produce an atmosphere conducive to cogent strategic thought.

The confused decision-making environment may have contributed to the Russian leaders' erroneous assumptions about their own military capabilities. According to Grachev, "one parachute regiment in two hours"<sup>24</sup> would resolve the crisis. Working from this platform of hubris, they identified Grozny and Dudayev as the Chechen centers of gravity. Overwhelming Russian superiority would crush these centers of gravity quickly, and the war would end almost

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<sup>22</sup> (R-4, 125)

<sup>23</sup> (R-3, 161)

<sup>24</sup> (R-3, 157)

before it began. These elitist assumptions permeated Russian decision-making, even when fierce Chechen resistance disproved them. Russian leaders simply could not believe the Chechens had developed tactics and strategies for defeating them on the battlefield. This mental paralysis prevented Russian leaders from understanding the nature of the conflict as it unfolded. Fog and friction on the battlefield multiplied their strategic myopia. Each Russian military action appeared to produce an opposite and magnified response by the Chechens. Rather than adjusting to this dynamic environment, Russian leaders continued to plod along, making few adjustments to their initial assumptions.

By most measures of merit, Chechen military strategies proved superior to Russian strategies. The Chechens confronted an opponent with vastly superior firepower and total air superiority, yet they consistently defeated them on the battlefield. When Russia prevailed, it did so not through superior strategy, but through sheer force of numbers. Even numerical superiority did not prevent the Chechens from retaking Grozny in an embarrassing Russian defeat. Russia's poor military performance tarnished its reputation within the international community and lowered its national self-esteem. Russian leadership demonstrated failures in understanding both the nature of their opponent and the nature of the conflict. For all of Russia's faults, however, when the military conflict ended Chechnya remained in the Russian Federation. Yeltsin used the military to protect Russia's national security interests and his own political career. The tortuous road to this desired end state required a heavy toll. Though Yeltsin's journey on this road is over, his successor may find the Chechen road just as hazardous.

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